

I've been stung by the wasp

William

"Time, For the sickening disease won't take control

I'll do it on my own, I'll do it all alone this time."

The Days After

The morning arrived soft and gray, filtering through curtains I'd forgotten to close.

For a moment, I didn't move. Just lay there with my eyes closed, cataloguing the sensations that felt foreign after so long. The warmth of another body beside me, radiating heat through the blankets. The soft sound of breathing that wasn't my own—slow and steady, the rhythm of deep sleep. The slight dip in the mattress where Lego's weight pressed down, shifting the geography of my bed in small but significant ways.

I opened my eyes.

The ceiling stared back at me, familiar and unchanged. But somehow, it didn't feel like my enemy this morning. It was just a ceiling. Just white plaster and the faint shadows of early light.

I woke slowly, consciousness returning in layers—first the warmth of blankets, then the faint scent of lavender from the fresh sheets, then the unfamiliar weight of another body beside me. My eyes opened to find Lego still asleep, curled on his side with his face half-buried in a pillow, his long hair spread across the fabric like dark water.

He was wearing my pajamas. The realization made something twist in my chest—something warm and protective and achingly tender. My pajamas, the gray cotton ones with the paint stains on the cuffs, were way too big for him. The sleeves had fallen past his wrists, bunching at his fingers. The collar gaped open, exposing one shoulder and the delicate line of his collarbone. He'd rolled up the pants at some point during the night, but they'd unrolled again, pooling around his bare feet. He looked like a child playing dress-up. Like the twelve-year-old who'd followed me home from art class all those years ago, too excited about painting to notice he was being annoying.

For a long moment, I just watched him breathe. He looked younger in sleep. The tension that had been carved into his features yesterday—the grief over the rejection, the worry over me—had smoothed away, leaving behind something softer. More vulnerable. The Lego I remembered from years ago, before life had taught either of us how to build walls.

I watched him breathe for a long moment.

In. Out. In. Out.

The rhythm was steady, peaceful. Whatever dreams he was having, they seemed gentle—no twitching, no furrowed brow, no signs of the distress that had marked his waking hours yesterday.

Good. He needed the rest.

We both did.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand. I reached for it carefully, trying not to disturb the bed, and squinted at the cracked screen. The damage was getting worse. The protective case long since abandoned somewhere in the chaos of my studio. I'd thrown this phone at a wall during one of my worse moments, and it had survived, barely. A metaphor, maybe. Or just stubbornness. Some of the touch-sensitive areas were barely responsive now, and there were whole sections of the screen I couldn't read at all. I should get a new phone, I thought. I really should.

The time read 7:23 AM. Earlier than I usually woke—the medication had been keeping me in deep sleep until nine or ten most mornings. But today felt different. Today, my body seemed to have decided that rest had been accomplished, that it was time to move.

Three new messages from my manager, all variations on glad you're okay, call me when you can. Two from the gallery, confirming shipping details. One from my father—just a single word: Progress?

I stared at that last one for a long time. Progress. Such a simple question. Such a complicated answer.

I'd taken the trash out yesterday. I'd stepped into the hallway, walked twenty feet, and come back. For most people, that wouldn't count as progress. For most people, that was just... existing. A basic function of daily life, unremarkable and unremarked upon. But for me—for someone who hadn't crossed his own threshold in three years—it was everything.

I typed back: Working on it.

Nothing else. Nothing from Est. I pushed the thought away before it could take root and grow into something painful. Not today. Today was for small victories. Today was for coffee and breakfast and the simple act of continuing to exist.

Then I set the phone aside and got up to make coffee.

I slid out of bed as quietly as I could, moving inch by inch to avoid disturbing Lego. The mattress creaked slightly as my weight shifted, and I froze, watching his face for any sign of waking. But he just sighed softly and burrowed deeper into the pillow, one hand curling loosely near his cheek.

The apartment looked different in the morning light. Yesterday's cleaning had transformed it from a disaster zone to something almost habitable. The wrapped paintings were still stacked by the door, but they looked purposeful now instead of chaotic. The kitchen was clean, the floors were mopped, the flowers Lego had brought stood bright and fresh in their vase.

Not perfect. But better. So much better than it had been.

I moved through the space quietly, filling the kettle, measuring out coffee grounds, going through the motions of a morning routine I'd almost forgotten how to perform. The normalcy of it felt strange—strange and good, like putting on clothes that had been in storage for years and finding they still fit.

The coffee maker, at least, was clean and ready—I'd washed it yesterday while Lego had tackled the dishes, scrubbing away the rings of old coffee that had accumulated in the carafe. I filled the machine with water and fresh grounds, moving through the routine with the mechanical efficiency of someone who'd done it a thousand times. Measure. Pour. Press the button. Wait.

The machine gurgled to life, and the smell of brewing coffee began to fill the apartment. It was a good smell. A normal smell. The kind of smell that regular people experienced every morning without thinking about it, without cataloguing it as evidence that life was still happening.

While I waited for the coffee to finish, I opened the refrigerator. The interior light flickered on, illuminating a landscape of emptiness. Half a bottle of water. Some condiments that had probably expired months ago. The cold air hit my face, a reminder of all the things I'd been neglecting. The interior was mostly empty—a sad landscape of forgotten intentions and bare shelves. There was the leftover pizza from last night, still in its box, taking up one of the middle shelves. A carton of eggs that was probably expired. Some condiments in the door—ketchup, mustard, a jar of chili paste that had been there so long I couldn't remember buying it. And the leftover pizza from last night—two slices remaining, their cheese congealed into unappetizing lumps. Not exactly a balanced breakfast. My stomach churned at the thought of cold pizza, the medication still making itself known in my digestive system. I needed something lighter. Something easier.

I closed the refrigerator and leaned against the counter, thinking. The coffee maker beeped. I poured myself a cup—and took the first sip. The bitterness spread across my tongue, sharp and clarifying. My stomach accepted it cautiously, the medication still making everything feel slightly unstable, but it stayed down.

Turned to my laptop, which was still sitting on the coffee table from yesterday. The kettle began its slow climb toward boiling as I carried the laptop to the sofa, then thought better of it and sat down on the floor instead, my back against the couch cushions. There was something grounding about the floor. The solidity of it. The way

it held me up without asking anything in return. I'd been spending a lot of time on floors lately—the studio floor, the bathroom floor, the living room floor. Maybe that was strange. Maybe it was just another symptom of everything that was wrong with me. But right now, it felt right. The position felt right somehow—grounded, stable, close to the earth.

I opened the laptop and navigated to the delivery app. The familiar interface loaded, all those restaurant logos and promises of hot food brought directly to my door. I scrolled through the options, looking for something that would satisfy multiple requirements: gentle enough for my medication-sensitive stomach, nutritious enough for Lego's depleted body, available for delivery at 7:30 in the morning.

I settled on a breakfast set from a place I'd ordered from before. Congee with various toppings—gentle on the stomach, warm and comforting. Some dim sum pieces for Lego, who I knew would want something more substantial. Fresh fruit. Juice. Simple things. Normal things.

The order went through. Thirty-five minutes for delivery.

I took another sip of coffee and opened a new tab.

The grocery delivery service loaded, and I stared at the interface with something like shame. My usual order history showed the pattern clearly: three deliveries per month, regular as clockwork, the same basic items every time. Rice. Eggs. Vegetables I'd cook if I remembered. Fruit that sometimes went bad before I ate it. The essentials of survival for someone who'd forgotten how to do more than survive.

But this month—I looked at the dates. My last delivery had been almost four weeks ago. The month had flown by, consumed by the disaster with Est, the spiral into depression, the frantic painting sessions that had replaced everything else. I'd been living on takeout and coffee and the occasional granola bar, my body running on fumes while my mind ran on anxiety. No wonder I felt so weak. No wonder the simple act of walking to the trash chute had left me breathless.

I started building a new order. Rice, yes. Eggs, yes. But also vegetables I'd actually eat—the pre-cut kind that required minimal preparation, that removed the barrier of having to wash and chop and pretend I had the energy for actual cooking. Fruit that came in individual portions, easier to grab and eat without commitment. Protein drinks for the days when solid food felt impossible. Crackers and ginger tea for the medication nausea that still hit every morning.

And things for Lego. The thought came unbidden, but once it arrived, I couldn't ignore it. If he was going to stay—and I wanted him to stay, I realized, wanted it with a fierceness that surprised me—then I needed to have things he would eat. The

yogurt he liked. The specific brand of tea he always drank at my apartment. Those little pastries from the bakery section that he pretended to buy for me but always ended up eating himself. I added them to the cart.

I placed the order. Delivery tomorrow afternoon. Another small victory. The apartment was quiet around me, the morning light growing stronger, the city beginning to wake up beyond my windows.

The wrapped paintings were still stacked near the door, exactly where I'd left them yesterday during my late-night packing session.

I stood up from the floor—my coffee half-finished now, lukewarm in my hands—and walked over to survey my work. Twelve pieces, carefully wrapped and labeled, ready for shipment. The logistics of getting them to the gallery were still unclear—I'd have to coordinate with my manager, arrange pickup, deal with the insurance paperwork—but at least they were ready. At least I'd done something.

The paintings needed attention.

I'd wrapped twelve of them yesterday, working through the small hours of the morning with the kind of manic energy that came from avoiding sleep. They sat stacked by the door now, ready for pickup, ready for shipping, ready to enter a world I'd been hiding from.

But there were more. There were always more.

The walk to the studio was short—just a few steps from the living room—but it felt significant somehow. Like crossing a threshold into a space that demanded something from me. The studio was chaos, still. Less chaotic than it had been a week ago, but far from orderly. Paint tubes scattered across every surface. Brushes soaking in jars of murky water. Sketches pinned to the walls, overlapping and contradicting each other. And canvases—so many canvases, in various states of completion, telling stories I wasn't always sure I understood. I moved through the space slowly, assessing what remained.

The finished pieces were easy enough to identify. The landscapes from the northern hills. The still lifes of objects that reminded me of my mother. The abstracts that had poured out of me during my darkest moments, all chaos and color and the particular kind of violence that came from fighting your own brain.

And then there were the others.

The pieces that weren't quite finished. The pieces that were finished but felt too personal to share. The pieces that represented things I wasn't ready to let go of.

Est's portrait was where I'd left it.

The cloth I'd used to cover it had slipped slightly, revealing the edge of the canvas. I

could see a hint of charcoal, the suggestion of a curve that might have been his jaw. The unfinished face, still waiting for me to find the courage to complete it. I'd thought so much about this painting over the past week. Let it go or keep it hidden forever—those had seemed like the only options. Finish it and send it to the exhibition as evidence of something I couldn't name. Or cover it permanently, let it rot in a corner, pretend the feelings it represented had never existed. The charcoal was fixed now, sealed with spray so it wouldn't smudge. The grays and blacks created shadows that looked almost alive, depths that suggested more than they revealed. I'd been planning to finish it. To add color, to bring warmth to those features, to transform the sketch into something complete. But looking at it now, I wondered if that was the wrong impulse. Maybe the incompleteness was part of the truth. Maybe leaving it in shades of gray said something about what we'd been—almost something, never quite arriving at color.

But there was a third option, I realized now. A harder option. The honest option.

Because despite everything, despite the pain and the regret and the knowledge that I'd ruined whatever we might have been, this painting was good. It was honest. It was one of the most truthful things I'd ever created. And maybe that meant something.

I pulled the cloth away completely.

Est's eyes looked back at me from the canvas—or what I'd managed to capture of them before the panic attack had sent everything spiraling. The charcoal strokes were rough, impressionistic, but there was something there. Something true. The intensity that had drawn me to him in the first place. The curiosity that seemed to radiate from every glance. The warmth that I'd been too afraid to accept.

I'm sorry, I thought. I'm sorry I couldn't be what you needed.

The words felt inadequate. They always did. But maybe inadequate was all I had.

I picked up the canvas and carried it out of the studio.

In the living room, I set it on the dining table and stood back, looking at it in the different light. The morning sun caught the charcoal in ways the studio lighting hadn't, bringing out details I'd almost forgotten I'd added. The curve of his jaw. The way his hair fell across his forehead. The particular angle of his nose.

Est. The man I'd pushed away because I was too scared to let him stay. I turned away from Est's portrait and went back to the studio. There was another painting waiting—one I'd been avoiding for different reasons.

My mother's painting was in the corner, propped against the wall where I'd left it days ago after working on it until my hands cramped.

I'd spent years on this piece. Years of adding layers, adjusting colors, trying to capture something that felt increasingly impossible to hold. My mother as I remembered her at the end—thin and pale, clearly weakened by the cancer that was stealing her from me, but still present. Still herself. It was the largest canvas I owned. Four feet by three feet, demanding wall space I didn't have, attention I couldn't always give. For months, it had lived in the corner of my studio, turned to face the wall because looking at it was too painful. But I'd turned it around last week. I'd been adding final touches, refining details, bringing it to a level of completion I hadn't thought I could reach.

She was wearing the white pajama nightgown she'd spent her last weeks in, the fabric soft and loose around her diminishing frame. Her hair was wrapped in a scarf—she'd lost most of it to the chemotherapy, and she'd been self-conscious about it, though I'd told her a thousand times that she was still beautiful. Her eyes were the hardest part. I'd repainted them dozens of times, trying to capture the particular quality of her gaze—tired but loving, fading but fierce, already half-gone but refusing to fully leave.

And behind her:—surrounding her, embracing her, lifting her up—flowers.

Thousands of them, filling the canvas in a riot of color and life. They cascaded around her like a halo, like a garden that had grown up around her, like visible proof of all the love and care that had defined her life. Some I recognized—roses and sunflowers and the lilies she'd grown in her garden. But most I didn't know by name. They cascaded down the canvas in waves of color, a riot of petals and stems and leaves that seemed to glow with their own inner light. Every shade I could mix. Every texture I could create. Every flower I could remember. I'd painted them from memory—from all those Wednesdays when Lego had arrived with his bouquets, explaining in careful detail what each bloom meant, what it symbolized, why he'd chosen it. I'd never paid much attention at the time. I'd just smiled and nodded and put the flowers in water, too caught up in my own darkness to appreciate what he was trying to give me.

But I'd been paying attention without realizing it. Somewhere, in the depths of my subconscious, I'd been cataloguing every petal, every color, every gentle curve of stem. And now here they were, surrounding my mother like a garden she'd never had time to grow.

I didn't know all their names. Lego would, if he were awake—he'd be able to identify each one, explain its meaning, tell me stories about their origins and uses. But I'd never been the one who listened. I'd been the one who drew.

That was my shame. My secret failure.

"William." she'd say, holding up a stem of something delicate and purple, "this is lavender. See how the petals grow?"

And I'd nod, not really seeing, my pencil moving across the page as I tried to capture the way the light fell through the shop window. I'd drawn flowers my whole life without ever really understanding them.

When I was a child, I'd gone to the flower shop with her every weekend. She'd tried to teach me—the names of each flower, their meanings, the language that blooms could speak when words weren't enough. But I hadn't listened. I'd been too busy drawing, too absorbed in capturing the shapes and colors to bother learning what they meant. The flower shop had been one of her favorite places, and she'd taken me there often, hoping to share her passion.

But I'd never listened. I'd sit in the corner with my sketchpad, drawing the flowers instead of learning about them. Drawing the customers. Drawing my mother as she moved through the displays, touching petals with reverent fingers, talking to the shopkeeper about cultivars and growing seasons. I'd captured the shapes without understanding the meaning.

And then Lego had arrived.

He was younger—a whiny kid with too much energy and not enough attention span, who'd latched onto me after a single art class and refused to let go. At first, I'd found him annoying. Invasive. Too loud, too curious, too present. But my mother had adored him.

She'd seen something in him that I'd been too wrapped up in myself to notice. A hunger, maybe—a desperate need for the kind of attention his own parents couldn't or wouldn't give. And she'd welcomed him into our home with the same generosity she showed everyone, making space at our table, teaching him things she'd tried to teach me.

Including the flowers. Lego had listened. He'd absorbed every word, every detail, every piece of knowledge my mother wanted to share. He'd learned the names and meanings and growing conditions. He'd helped her in her garden, planted seeds, harvested blooms. He'd become the student she'd always wanted, the one who actually cared about what she was teaching. And I'd watched, grateful that someone was paying attention, guilty that it wasn't me.

Now, years later, I was painting her surrounded by flowers I couldn't name. Honoring her in the language she'd loved, the language I'd never bothered to learn. Maybe that was fitting. Maybe that was the only kind of tribute I could offer—images without words, shapes without meanings, the visual vocabulary that was all I'd ever really understood.

"I'm sorry." I told her painting too. "I'm sorry I didn't listen."

But there was no answer. There never was.



And when she got sick, when the hospital visits started and the house grew quiet with the weight of things unsaid, Lego had kept bringing flowers. Every visit, a new arrangement. Something to brighten her room. Something to remind her of the garden she could no longer tend.

After she died, he'd kept bringing them to me.

Every Wednesday for three years. Rain or shine. Good days and bad days. He'd show up at my door with flowers I couldn't name, arranged with a skill I'd never developed, evidence of a love I'd done nothing to earn.

The flowers in my mother's portrait were those flowers. Every Wednesday bouquet, captured in paint, surrounding her like the devotion they represented. I stared at the painting until my eyes blurred.

This is my best work, I thought. This is everything I've been trying to say for three years. I picked it up carefully, feeling the weight of the canvas in my hands.

I set both paintings on the dining room table, side by side.

Est's unfinished portrait. My mother surrounded by flowers. They were so different—one a sketch, barely begun, and the other years in the making. One a face I might never see again, and the other a face that lived now only in memory and paint. But together, they represented something. The two poles of my current existence. The past I couldn't release and the future I'd been too afraid to embrace.

I started with Est's painting. The supplies were still scattered across the dining room from my late-night packing session—bubble wrap and cardboard corners, packing tape and scissors, the careful infrastructure of protecting vulnerable things for transit. I worked slowly, methodically, wrapping the canvas with the same attention I'd given to all the others. But this one was different.

As I fitted the cardboard corners over the frame, as I taped the edges securely, I thought about what this painting meant. What it would say when someone—a curator, a gallery assistant, eventually a stranger at the exhibition—saw it. An unfinished portrait. A face caught mid-becoming. Evidence of something that had started but never been completed.

What would they think? Would they see the love in those careful charcoal lines? Would they understand the hours I'd spent studying Est's face, learning the planes and angles, trying to capture the particular quality of attention that made his eyes so compelling? Would they recognize that this wasn't abandonment—that stopping mid-work was sometimes its own kind of honesty? Probably not, I thought. They'll just see an unfinished painting. But maybe that was okay. Maybe the meaning didn't need to be understood by anyone else. Maybe it was enough that I understood.

I finished wrapping the canvas and reached for the thin shipping box I'd set aside.

The painting slid in perfectly, cushioned by layers of protection. I taped the box closed and turned it over, looking for the label area. The information sticker was standard—artist name, title of work, dimensions, medium. I filled in the first fields automatically: William Jakrapatr. Charcoal on canvas. 60x80cm. But when I reached the title field, I hesitated.

What was this painting called? I thought about all the things I might write. None of them were right. I stared at the blank space until the cursor blinked at me impatiently.

And then I wrote the only honest thing.

I'm Sorry.

The words appeared on the screen, small and stark. Two words that encompassed everything—the panic attack, the screaming, the moment I'd thrown him out instead of asking him to stay. The messages I'd drafted and deleted. The apology I couldn't seem to send directly but could somehow offer here, in the language of my work.

It was cowardice, maybe. A way of saying what needed to be said without the vulnerability of actually saying it. But it was also true.

And maybe, when the exhibition opened, when Est saw his own half-formed face on a gallery wall with those two words as the title—maybe then he would understand what I'd been too broken to articulate. Maybe not. Either way, the truth would be there. Hanging in a public space, visible to anyone who cared to look. Evidence that I'd tried, even if trying had come too late. I saved the information and set the box aside.

My mother's painting required even more care. I'd handled it hundreds of times over the years—moving it from easel to wall to floor and back again, adjusting it to catch different light, studying it from different angles as I worked. But I'd never wrapped it for shipping before. I'd never prepared it to leave me.

The bubble wrap felt insufficient somehow. I doubled it, then tripled it, creating layers of protection around a canvas that couldn't really be protected. The painting itself was fragile in ways that had nothing to do with physical construction. It was fragile because it was the last significant work I'd created before my world collapsed. Fragile because it represented years of grief processed through pigment. Fragile because letting it go meant accepting that it was finished, that there was nothing more I could add, that my mother's image would exist in the world without me there to guard it.

I worked slowly, carefully, treating each step like a ritual.

The bubble wrap went on first, taped securely at the edges. Then the cardboard

corners, fitted precisely over each vulnerable point. Then another layer of wrap, then the kraft paper, then the box—this one custom-ordered months ago, sized exactly for this painting, waiting in the corner of my studio for the moment I finally had the courage to use it.

The moment was now. I slid the painting into the box and felt something release in my chest. Not sadness, exactly. Not relief either. Something more complicated. The feeling of letting go of something you'd held too tightly for too long.

This is what you wanted, I reminded myself. You wanted people to see her. To understand.

The information sticker went on the outside. Artist name. Dimensions. Medium. Title: Bloom.

Because that's what she was doing in the painting. Despite the illness, despite the weakness, despite the shadow of death that hung over every brushstroke—she was blooming. Surrounded by flowers, becoming one of them, transforming into something beautiful and eternal.

I stared at the box. I don't know how long I stood there—minutes, maybe, or longer. Time had a tendency to slip away from me when I was lost in thought, when the weight of emotion pressed down too heavily to allow for movement or action. The morning light shifted around me, the stripe of gold from the window moving slowly across the floor, measuring the passage of time I wasn't counting.

Both paintings were boxed now, ready for shipping. They sat side by side on the dining room table—two rectangular shapes, anonymous in their cardboard and tape, giving no hint of the worlds contained within.

I'd done it. I'd packed the pieces I'd been avoiding, the ones that meant more than just art. I'd committed to sharing them with strangers, to letting go of the illusion that I could protect myself by hiding.

The thought should have terrified me. A week ago, it would have sent me spiraling into panic.

But today, standing in the morning light with the taste of cold coffee still on my tongue, I felt something else instead. Something that might have been peace. Or maybe just exhaustion. It was hard to tell the difference sometimes.

A weight settled against my back.

I startled, spinning half around before I registered what was happening. Lego had approached silently—or maybe not silently; maybe I'd just been too lost in my head to hear—and was now sitting behind me on the floor, his back pressed against mine.

The contact was warm. Solid. Real in a way that grounded me instantly, pulling me

out of my thoughts and into my body. He didn't say anything at first. Just sat there, his spine aligned with mine, his weight supporting mine as much as mine was supporting his. I could feel his breathing—slow and even, still heavy with sleep—and the slight shift of his shoulder blades as he adjusted his position.

Then his hand appeared in my peripheral vision, reaching around to grab my coffee cup from where I'd left it on the floor beside me. "It's cold," he complained, his voice rough with morning.

The words were so mundane, so ordinary, that I almost laughed. Here I was, contemplating the meaning of art and grief and apology, and Lego's first observation of the day was about the temperature of my coffee. But that was Lego, wasn't it? That was who he'd always been—the one who noticed the practical things, the small details, the immediate reality that I so often overlooked.

Lego was warm against me.

I almost laughed. After everything—the breakdown, the bathroom floor vigil, the tearful confessions and the careful cleaning—after all of it, his first words of the morning were a complaint about the temperature of my coffee.

"I made it hours ago," I said. "I've been up for a while."

"How long?"

"Since seven, maybe? I couldn't sleep anymore. The medication..." I trailed off, not sure how to explain the strange rhythms of medicated sleep—the depth of unconsciousness followed by sudden, alert waking, the inability to drift back under once the chemicals had worn off.

Lego made a sound of understanding against my back. I felt him shift, settling more comfortably against me, his weight a grounding presence. I'd forgotten how much I missed this.

"You've been up that long?" He took a sip of the cold coffee anyway, grimacing at the taste. "You should have woken me."

"You needed the sleep."

"So did you."

"I slept. The bathtub, remember?"

He snorted—a sound that was almost a laugh but not quite. "The bathtub doesn't count as real sleep." Maybe not. But it had been the deepest rest I'd managed in days, and waking up from it to find Lego watching over me had been... something. A gift I hadn't known I needed.

I didn't say any of that. I just sat there, feeling the warmth of his back against mine, letting the contact speak for itself. This was something I'd forgotten.

When we were younger—when Lego was twelve and thirteen and fourteen, bright-eyed and clingy and desperate for connection—he'd been so physically affectionate. Always hugging me, always leaning against me, always finding excuses to be close. He'd jump on my back when I was painting, wrap his arms around my waist when I was cooking, curl up against me on the couch during movies until we were tangled together like puppies in a pile.—when Lego had first started spending time at my house, first started becoming part of my family—he'd been constantly physical. Always hugging, always leaning, always finding excuses to be in contact. He'd drape himself across my back while I was painting. He'd fall asleep on my shoulder during movies. He'd tackle me in the garden, wrestling over nothing, laughing until we were both breathless.

I'd found it annoying at first. Invasive. I wasn't used to being touched so casually, so freely. My mother had been affectionate, but in a gentler way—a hand on my cheek, a kiss on my forehead, nothing as aggressive as Lego's full-body enthusiasm. But somewhere along the way, I'd gotten used to it. And then I'd started needing it, craving it, feeling its absence like a missing limb when Lego wasn't around. And then I'd lost it.

I'd pushed him away, gradually, as my illness had worsened. The touch aversion that came with anxiety. The need for control over my personal space. The way closeness had started to feel suffocating instead of safe. And he'd respected that. He'd learned to keep his distance, to express his care through flowers and cleaning and the quiet act of showing up. He'd adapted to my brokenness instead of demanding I adapt to his need for touch.

Not all at once. Gradually, over the years of quarantine, as I'd withdrawn further and further into myself. Lego had kept coming—every Wednesday, without fail—but I'd grown cold. Distant. I'd stopped initiating contact, stopped responding when he reached for me. I'd built walls so thick that even his persistent warmth couldn't get through.

And he'd adapted. Because that was what Lego did—he adapted, he adjusted, he made himself smaller to fit the spaces people left for him. He'd stopped hugging me. Stopped leaning on me. Stopped all the casual touches that had once been as natural as breathing.

The only time we touched now was when one of us was crying.

The thought surfaced with a stab of regret. That was true, wasn't it? The last times we'd really touched—held each other, been physically close—had been in moments of crisis. His breakdown yesterday, sobbing against my shoulder. My own breakdown on the bathroom floor, his hand on my cheek. Tears and desperation, pain and fear.

I didn't want that anymore.

But now—sitting here with his back against mine, his warmth seeping into my cold bones—I realized how much I'd lost by pulling away. How much we'd both lost. I wanted the casual touches back. The random hugs, the comfortable closeness, the easy physical language of people who loved each other without needing tragedy as an excuse.

"Good morning." Lego said, his voice still rough with sleep. The words were simple, ordinary, the kind of thing people said to each other every day without thinking about it. But hearing them—hearing him say them from behind me, pressed against my back in my too-big pajamas, his presence a reminder that I wasn't alone—made my throat tighten with emotion.

I opened my mouth to say the same, to return the greeting, to acknowledge this small, normal moment.

The doorbell rang. "Breakfast." I said instead, relief and disappointment mixing in my chest. Relief because food was important, because taking care of ourselves mattered. Disappointment because the moment—whatever it might have become—had been interrupted. I stood up, my back suddenly cold where Lego's warmth had been.

The delivery driver was young—university-aged, probably—with a bright smile and a bag that smelled of warm congee and savory dim sum. I took it from him quickly, murmuring my thanks, trying not to let him see too much of the apartment behind me. The chaos was mostly cleaned up, but there were still paintings everywhere, still evidence of a life that didn't look like other people's lives.

Normal, I reminded myself. You're allowed to be normal. You're allowed to answer the door and accept a delivery and not explain yourself to strangers.

I closed the door and carried the bag to the dining room, pushing aside the empty shipping boxes to make space.

Lego had moved while I was at the door. He was standing now, stretching his arms above his head, the too-long sleeves of my pajamas flopping around his wrists. His hair was a mess—dark strands sticking up in every direction, evidence of restless sleep—and there was a crease on his cheek from the pillow.

He looked like a disaster. He looked like home. "What did you get?" he asked, padding over on bare feet to investigate.

"Congee. And dim sum for you." I started unpacking the bag, setting out containers on the table. "I didn't know what you'd want, so I got a variety. There's also fruit, and juice, and—"

"P'Will." Lego's voice was soft, interrupting my inventory. "Thank you."

I looked up. He was watching me with an expression I couldn't quite read—something between gratitude and something else, something deeper.

"It's just breakfast." I said, uncomfortable with the weight of his attention.

"It's not just breakfast." He moved closer, and before I could prepare myself, he was wrapping his arms around me. Not the desperate, crying hug of yesterday—something gentler. Something that felt like a beginning instead of an ending. "It's you taking care of me. It's you ordering food that I like. It's you thinking about me." He pressed his forehead against my shoulder, his voice muffled by the fabric of my shirt. "I didn't think you noticed. What I liked, I mean. I thought you were too—"

"Too broken to pay attention?"

"Too overwhelmed. Too stuck in your own head." He pulled back slightly, looking up at me. "But you remembered the dim sum. You remembered I like the shrimp ones."

"I remember everything." The admission came out before I could stop it, raw and honest. "I remember the first time you came to my house after art class. I remember the way my mother's face lit up when she saw you. I remember every flower arrangement you've ever brought me, even if I don't know their names. I remember—" I stopped, my throat tight.

"I remember everything," I repeated. "I just don't always know how to show it." Lego's arms tightened around me, and this time, I let myself hug him back.

We ate at the dining room table, the wrapped paintings pushed to one side to make room for our breakfast spread.

The congee was warm and soothing, sliding down easily despite the lingering unease in my stomach from the medication. I ate slowly, carefully, giving my body time to adjust to each bite. Lego, by contrast, attacked the dim sum with the enthusiasm of someone who hadn't eaten properly in days—which, I realized, was probably true.

"These are really good." he said around a mouthful of siu mai, his cheeks bulging like a chipmunk's.

"Chew your food."

"You sound like Auntie." The words slipped out casually, but they landed between us with weight. Auntie. My mother. The woman who had loved us both, who had taught us both, who had left us both too soon.

"She used to say that," I acknowledged. "Usually to you. You always ate too fast."

"She said I'd choke."

"You almost did, once. That time with the fish bones."

Lego laughed—a real laugh, bright and surprised, the first genuine laughter I'd heard from him since he'd arrived. "Oh god, I forgot about that. She had to do the Heimlich on me."

"You cried for an hour afterward."

"I was twelve! I thought I was dying!"

"You were dramatic," I corrected, but I was smiling now too, the memory softening the edges of the grief that usually accompanied thoughts of my mother. "She said you were the most dramatic child she'd ever met."

"Excuse me, she said I was expressive. There's a difference."

"She was being polite."

Lego threw a piece of dim sum at me. It bounced off my chest and landed on the table, leaving a small grease stain on my shirt. I looked down at it, then back at him, and for a moment, the years fell away. We were kids again, sitting at my mother's table, bickering over nothing while she watched us with patient, loving eyes.

"I miss her," Lego said quietly, the laughter fading. "I miss her so much."

"Me too." The silence that followed wasn't uncomfortable. It was full—full of shared grief, shared memory, shared love for someone who had shaped us both.

"She would have been proud of you," Lego said eventually. "The exhibition. The paintings. All of it."

"She would have worried about me."

"That too. But proud first." He reached across the table and touched my hand, his fingers light on my knuckles. "She always said you were going to do something important. That you saw the world differently, and someday you'd show everyone else how to see it too."

I thought about the paintings stacked by the door. The years of work, the processing of grief, the attempt to translate the chaos in my head into something others could understand.

"I don't know if I'm doing anything important." I admitted. "I'm just... surviving. Painting because it's the only thing I know how to do."

"That's important too." Lego's hand squeezed mine. "Surviving is important. Especially when it's hard."



After breakfast, we cleaned up together—Lego washing the containers while I dried them and put away the leftovers. The rhythm was familiar, comforting. We'd done this a hundred times at my mother's house, back when every meal ended with shared cleanup and quiet conversation.

When the kitchen was restored to order, Lego turned to me with a look I recognized—the one that said he was about to say something I probably didn't want to hear.

"What?" I asked, bracing myself.

"The paintings." He nodded toward the dining room, where the two wrapped canvases sat on the table. "You finished them this morning?"

"Wrapped them. They were already done. Mostly." I hesitated. "One of them isn't really finished. But it's... it's ready to go anyway."

"Which one?"

"Est's."

The name hung in the air between us.

"You're including it in the exhibition?"

"Yes."

"Even though it's not finished?"

"Because it's not finished." I moved past him, toward the dining room, suddenly needing to be near the paintings again. "I've been thinking about it. About what the exhibition should say. Everyone expects grief and isolation and depression—the dark stuff, the heavy stuff. And that's there. That's real. But it's not all there is." I stood beside the table, looking down at the two wrapped boxes.

"My mother surrounded by flowers. That's hope. That's beauty surviving even in the darkest places. And Est's portrait, unfinished..." I touched the edge of the box, feeling the tape beneath my fingers. "That's honesty. That's saying 'I tried and I failed, but I tried.' That's more true than any polished, complete piece I could create."

Lego was quiet for a long moment. Then: "What did you name it? Est's piece?"

"I'm Sorry."

He let out a long breath. "P'Will..."

"I know. It's not enough. It doesn't fix anything. But it's what I have. It's the only way I know how to say it."

"Have you thought about just... texting him? Actually apologizing?"

"Every day." I admitted. "I've written dozens of messages. Deleted all of them. Nothing sounds right. Nothing feels genuine enough."

"But putting it on a canvas and hanging it in a gallery feels genuine?"

I turned to face him, ready to defend myself—but the look on his face wasn't accusatory. It was understanding. Maybe even sympathetic.

"It's different when it's art," I said slowly, trying to articulate something I'd never put into words before. "When I write a text, I'm performing. I'm choosing words, arranging them, trying to predict how they'll be received. But when I paint... I'm just telling the truth. The brush doesn't let me lie. The canvas doesn't care if I'm embarrassed. It just... shows what's real."

Lego nodded slowly. "I think I understand that."

"Do you?"

"Yeah. It's like..." He paused, thinking. "It's like how I feel when I arrange flowers. I can't lie with flowers. They either work together or they don't. There's no way to fake it."

Something in my chest eased at his words. Of course he understood. He'd been trained by the same woman who'd trained me. He knew how it felt to speak through creation instead of conversation.

"I'm still going to have to face him eventually," I said. "At the exhibition, if not before. The agency kept him on for event photography."

"I know. Hong mentioned."

I raised an eyebrow. "You've been talking to Hong about this?"

Color rose in Lego's cheeks—faint, but visible. "He texted me. After... after everything. He said Tui was looking for me."

The name landed like a stone. Tui. The man who'd broken Lego's heart without even knowing he was doing it. The fool who'd called him a kid, who'd failed to see what was right in front of him.

"Are you going to talk to him?" I asked carefully.

"I don't know." Lego's voice was small. "Part of me wants to run away and never see him again. But part of me... Hong said it wasn't what I thought."

"Do you believe that?"

"I don't know." He repeated. "I want to. But wanting something to be true doesn't make it true."

I thought about Est. About all the things I'd wanted to believe about our connection, all the hope I'd invested in the possibility of something more. About how that hope had made the fall even harder when everything collapsed.

"No," I agreed. "It doesn't."

We stood there in silence, two broken people surrounded by wrapped paintings and the remnants of breakfast, the weight of our respective heartbreaks filling the space between us. "But maybe," I said slowly, "wanting something to be true is a starting point. Maybe it's the thing that makes us brave enough to find out."

Lego looked at me—really looked, the way he had when we were kids, when he'd decided I was the most interesting person in the world and attached himself to my side. "Are you going to find out?" he asked. "About Est?"

I thought about the painting wrapped on the table. About the title I'd given it. About the exhibition where we'd both be forced to exist in the same space, breathing the same air, maybe finally having the conversation I'd been too afraid to start. "I think so," I said. "Eventually. When I'm ready."

"What about in the meantime?"

I looked at him—at his tired eyes and messy hair, at the too-big pajamas and the crumbs still clinging to the corner of his mouth.

"In the meantime," I said, "I focus on the things I can do. The small steps. The daily stuff." I reached out and brushed the crumb from his cheek. "And I try to remember that I'm not doing any of it alone."

Lego smiled—that bright, genuine smile that had first convinced my mother to love him, that had kept me anchored to the world through three years of isolation.

"You're getting better at this." he said.

"At what?"

"At being a person."

I laughed—a rusty sound, unused, but real. "I'm trying."

"I know." He reached up and caught my hand where it still rested near his face. "That's what matters."

The morning light had shifted while we talked, moving from gold to white, the day fully arrived. My phone buzzed somewhere in the other room—probably my manager, probably more logistics to handle, probably another demand from a world

that wouldn't wait for me to be ready. But for now, in this moment, none of that mattered. For now, there was just this: Lego's hand in mine. The wrapped paintings waiting to carry my truth into the world. The smell of breakfast lingering in the apartment. The knowledge that yesterday, I'd taken the trash out. That today, I'd ordered groceries. That tomorrow—Tomorrow was a problem for tomorrow. Today was enough.

10:57 AM

"I'm going to take a shower." I announced, surprising myself with the decision. It was such a normal thing to say. Such an ordinary declaration. The kind of thing regular people said every day without thinking about it, without cataloguing it as evidence of recovery. But for me—for someone who'd been letting basic self-care slip for weeks—it felt significant.

Lego looked up from where he was scrolling through his phone, still wearing my too-big pajamas, still looking like a disaster in the most endearing way possible. "Good idea." he said.

I threw a wadded-up napkin at him. He dodged it easily, laughing.

"Go shower." he said, waving me off. "I'll make tea when you're done."

"You're making yourself very comfortable in my apartment."

"Your apartment has better tea than mine." He stretched, the motion making my pajama sleeves flop dramatically. "Also better water pressure. And better heating. And better—"

"Okay, okay. I get it. My apartment is superior."

"Your apartment is tolerable." Lego corrected. "Your company is superior."

The compliment—so casual, so offhand—made something warm bloom in my chest. "Twenty minutes." I said, turning toward the bathroom. "Don't break anything."

"No promises!"

The shower was exactly what I needed. I stood under the spray for longer than strictly necessary, letting the hot water pound against my shoulders, feeling the tension slowly drain from muscles I hadn't even realized were tight. The steam filled the bathroom, fogging the mirror, creating a small, warm world where nothing existed except sensation.

I washed my hair—properly washed it, with shampoo and conditioner and the careful attention I'd been neglecting. Scrubbed my body with actual soap instead of just standing under the water and hoping for the best. Shaved, though my hands trembled slightly and I nicked myself twice.

By the time I stepped out and wrapped a towel around my waist, I felt almost human. The face in the foggy mirror looked different than I expected. Still tired, still marked by weeks of poor sleep and worse eating. But there was something else there too. Something that might have been hope.

I dressed in comfortable clothes—a tracksuit, soft and well-worn, the kind of outfit I'd lived in during the worst of my isolation. But today it didn't feel like giving up. It felt like permission. Permission to be comfortable, to prioritize ease over appearance, to focus on recovery instead of presentation.

When I emerged from my bedroom, Lego was in the kitchen.

Lego had changed clothes too—back into his own outfit from yesterday, the oversized sweatshirt and gray shorts that made him look impossibly young. He'd done something with his hair, taming the sleep-tangles into a loose ponytail that fell over one shoulder. His makeup was gone—washed off at some point while I was showering—and without it, his face looked softer, more vulnerable.

"There's tea," he said without turning around. "Or there will be, in a minute. I found your stash."

"My stash?"

"The fancy loose-leaf stuff in the cupboard. The one you never use." He finally turned, flashing me a quick smile. "Auntie would be horrified that you let it just sit there."

He was right. My mother had sent me that tea a year before she died—a carefully curated selection of her favorites, each blend chosen for specific moods and occasions. I'd never opened most of the containers. They'd just sat in the cupboard, slowly going stale, because using them felt too much like admitting she wasn't coming back to share them with me.

"Flower tea," Lego continued, pulling out a glass pot I didn't remember owning. "She always said flower tea was good for sad days. Something about the visual aspect—watching the blooms unfurl in hot water. Therapeutic, she called it."

I moved closer, watching as he measured dried flowers into the pot. They were delicate things—pale pink and white petals, with hints of yellow stamen at the center. Chrysanthemums, maybe, or something similar. I didn't know. I'd never learned. "You know I don't know what any of those are." I admitted.

"I know." Lego didn't seem bothered by this. "That's okay. You don't need to know the names to appreciate them." He poured the hot water over the dried flowers, and I watched them begin to move. Slowly, gracefully, the petals started to separate and expand, releasing their color into the water, dancing in the heat like something alive.

"See?" Lego said softly. "Therapeutic." We stood there in silence, watching the flowers bloom.

Soft sounds were drifting from his phone, propped against a book on the coffee table. Something instrumental, quiet and warm, filling the apartment with gentle melody.

"I hope you don't mind," Lego said, looking up from where he was arranging tea cups in the kitchen. "I can't exist in silence anymore. It makes me anxious."

"It's fine." More than fine, actually. The music made the apartment feel alive in a way it hadn't in months. Less like a tomb and more like a home.

He'd connected to my Bluetooth speaker, the one I never used, filling the apartment with gentle sound. It was strange. For three years, this apartment had been defined by silence. Even when I played music, it was through headphones, contained, private. The idea of sound filling the whole space had seemed too much, too overwhelming, too likely to attract the attention of neighbors who might wonder what the reclusive artist was doing in there. But this was different. This was Lego's music, shared freely, turning my silent apartment into something that felt more like a home.

I sat at one end of the sofa, sipping my flower tea from a clear glass cup that let me watch the petals continue their slow dance. The tea tasted like—I didn't know what it tasted like, actually. Light. Floral, obviously. A little sweet. Like something my mother would have approved of.

Lego sat next to me. And then, with the casual confidence of someone who had done it a thousand times before, he lifted his feet and deposited them in my lap. I looked down at his socked feet—and then back up at his face. "What are you doing?"

"Getting comfortable." He wiggled his toes against my thigh. "You don't mind." It wasn't a question. It was a statement of fact. And he was right—I didn't mind. Or rather, I did mind, in the sense that it was an invasion of my carefully guarded personal space, but it was also exactly the kind of casual touch I'd been mourning this morning. The easy physicality of people who loved each other.

"You're like a cat," I said. "Just settling wherever you want without asking permission."

"Cats have the right idea." Lego took a sip of his own tea, looking supremely unbothered. "Ask permission too often and people start thinking they have the right to say no."

"People do have the right to say no."

"Not to cat things. Cat things are sacred." I snorted—an undignified sound that I immediately regretted—and his face lit up with pleased mischief.

"That's better," he said. "You've been way too serious for way too long. Someone needs to make you make stupid sounds."

"I don't make stupid sounds."

"You literally just snorted like a pig."

"I did not—" I stopped, because he was already laughing, and the sound was so bright and alive in my silent apartment that I couldn't bring myself to argue. "Fine. I snorted. It was your fault."

"I accept full responsibility." He settled deeper into the sofa cushions, his feet pressing more firmly into my lap. "Now drink your tea and tell me embarrassing stories from your childhood. I need material."

"What material? For what?"

"For leverage. For the next time you try to act all dignified and above it all." He grinned. "I need to be able to remind you of that time you did something stupid."

"You already know all my stupid stories."

"I know I don't. There's got to be stuff from before we met. You were thirteen when I first came to your house. That's thirteen years of potential embarrassment that I've never had access to." I thought about it. Thirteen years of childhood, before Lego had crashed into my life with all his questions and energy and determination to be my friend whether I wanted him or not. Years of art classes and arguments with classmates and failed attempts at social interaction.

"There was this one time," I said slowly, "when I was maybe eight or nine. I decided I was going to run away from home."

Lego's eyes widened. "You? Running away? I can't picture it."

"I was very dramatic as a child."

"What changed?"

"Shut up." But I was smiling now, the memory surfacing like something long-buried finally finding its way to light. "I packed a bag and everything. Clothes, some snacks, my favorite sketchbook. I was very prepared."

"Where were you going to go?"

"That was the problem. I hadn't actually thought that far ahead." I shook my head, the absurdity of it clear even now. "I made it about two blocks from the house

before I realized I had no idea where I was. We'd just moved—this was before my mother's house, before the one you know—and I didn't know the neighborhood at all."

"Oh no."

"Oh yes. I sat down on a bench and cried for about an hour. Some nice old man eventually found me and asked if I was lost. I was too embarrassed to admit I'd been trying to run away, so I just said yes." I laughed, the sound rusty but genuine. "He walked me back home. My mother was waiting at the door—she'd been watching from the window the whole time. She'd seen me pack my bag and leave, and she just... let me go."

"She let you go?"

"She knew I'd come back. She said later that some lessons you have to learn by doing. The lesson of 'running away is harder than it looks' was one of them."

Lego was quiet for a moment, his feet stilling in my lap. "She was smart."

"She was. I didn't always appreciate it at the time."

"None of us appreciate our parents at the time." His voice was carefully neutral—the voice of someone who'd learned not to show emotion when talking about family. "That's kind of the point, isn't it? You understand later."

I thought about Lego's parents—the ones who'd sent him to the city at sixteen, who'd started new families that didn't include him, who sent money instead of love and birthday gifts that proved they didn't know him at all.

"Some parents deserve to be appreciated," I said carefully. "Others don't."

Lego shrugged, but I could see the tension in his shoulders. "It is what it is."

"It shouldn't be what it is. They should have been better."

"Yeah." He was quiet for a moment. "But they weren't. And at some point you have to stop waiting for people to be better and just... move on." The weight of his words settled between us. We'd both lost parents, in different ways. His were alive but absent. Mine was present in memory but gone from the world. Neither loss was easier than the other—they were just different colors of the same grief.

"Tell me about university," I said, deliberately changing the subject. "What are you studying again? I can never remember."

"Because you never listen when I tell you." But he was smiling again, the tension easing from his posture. "Contemporary dance, officially. With a minor in choreography."



"And you like it?"

"I love it." The passion in his voice was unmistakable. "The professors are intense, and the schedule is brutal, but there's something about being in a room full of people who all love the same thing you do. We push each other. We make each other better."

I tried to imagine it—a room full of dancers, all working toward the same goal, all speaking the same physical language. It sounded terrifying to me, all those bodies in one space, all that potential for judgment and comparison. But Lego lit up when he talked about it.

"There's this one senior," he continued, warming to the topic. "She's been dancing since she was three, and she moves like—I don't know how to describe it. Like gravity doesn't apply to her. Like she's having a conversation with the air and the air is answering back."

"That sounds like poetry."

"It is poetry. That's what dance is, really. Poetry in motion." He wiggled his toes again, a habit I was starting to recognize as an expression of enthusiasm. "I want to move like that someday. Like the rules don't apply because I've transcended them, not because I'm breaking them."

"What's the difference?"

"Breaking rules is rebellion. Transcending them is mastery." He considered for a moment. "Like—okay, in painting. When you were learning, you followed the rules, right? Color theory, composition, technique?"

"More or less."

"But now, when you break those rules, it's not because you don't know them. It's because you know them so well that you can see beyond them. You understand what the rules are for, so you know when it's meaningful to violate them."

I stared at him, surprised by the insight. "When did you get so wise?"

"I've always been wise. You were just too busy being the mysterious older brother to notice."

"Mysterious?"

"That's what I called you when I first met you. To my mom, before..." He trailed off, the light dimming slightly. "Before she left. I told her about the strange older boy at the art class who didn't talk to anyone but made the most beautiful drawings. I said you were mysterious."

"What did she say?"

"She said mysterious people usually just needed a friend who wasn't afraid of silence." Lego smiled, a little sadly. "I decided I was going to be that friend. I don't think I was very good at the silence part."

"You were exactly right," I said, meaning it. "Exactly what I needed."

The tea was finished, the pot empty, the flowers reduced to pale ghosts of their former selves floating at the bottom of the glass. Lego was still nestled against me, but we'd shifted positions over the course of our conversation. He was now leaning against my side, his head resting against my shoulder, his legs curled up on the couch beside him. The music had cycled through several playlists, transitioning from ambient electronic to soft acoustic to something that sounded like instrumental versions of pop songs.

Lego's expression softened, the teasing fading into something more sincere. "You used to let me do this, you know. When we were younger. I'd put my head in your lap while you were sketching, and you'd just... let me stay there."

"I remember."

"I miss that."

"Me too."

The admission hung in the air between us, honest and a little raw. We sat with it for a moment, the music playing softly in the background, the tea cooling in our hands.

"I'm trying to be better." I said finally. "At letting people in. At not pushing everyone away."

"I know." Lego's foot nudged against my thigh—a small, affectionate gesture. "I can tell. The way you hugged me yesterday, the way you ordered my favorite food this morning... it's different. You're different."

"Different how?"

"More present. More... you. The you I remember from before everything got hard." I didn't know what to say to that. The person I'd been before—before quarantine, before my mother's death, before the agoraphobia had swallowed me whole—felt like a stranger now. A character in a story I'd read once, distant and unclear.

"Can I tell you something?" he asked.

"Of course."

"I want to take out my extensions." I looked at him, surprised. His hair—the long, dark waves that had become part of his identity—was something I'd assumed he

loved. Something he'd grown attached to, maybe even needed.

"I thought you loved them." I said.

"I do. Did." He touched the ends of his hair, twisting a strand between his fingers. "It started as a modeling thing, you know? The photo shoot that got me into the agency. They wanted someone with long hair for this traditional concept, and I didn't have time to grow it, so... extensions."

"I remember. You showed me the photos."

"They were really good photos." A small smile crossed his face. "And I liked having long hair. It made me feel... I don't know. Different. Special. Like I was playing a character, and the character was more interesting than the real me."

"Lego—"

"But lately..." He sighed, still playing with the strand. "It's a lot of maintenance. The extensions, I mean. They need to be washed a certain way, styled a certain way, attached and reattached constantly. And they're expensive. And sometimes when I look in the mirror, I don't even recognize myself anymore."

"Is that bad?"

"I don't know. It's just... I started wearing them because of work. And then I kept wearing them because people expected it. And now I can't remember if I actually like them, or if I just got used to them." I understood that feeling more than I wanted to admit. The way habits could become prisons. The way other people's expectations could calcify into self-imposed rules. "This photographer wanted me to look a certain way, and they put extensions in, and everyone kept saying how beautiful I looked, how it suited me, how I should keep them. So I kept them. And then everyone kept reacting to them, commenting on them, making them part of how they saw me. Long-haired Lego. Pretty Lego. The one who looks almost like a girl sometimes."

"I understand." I said slowly. "Wearing a version of yourself that doesn't quite fit."

"What do you want?" I asked. "Not what's easier, not what people expect. What do you actually want?"

Lego was quiet for a moment, thinking. "I want to try having short hair again," he said finally. "The way it was when we were kids. Before I started caring about how I looked, before I learned that being pretty could be a job." He glanced at me, vulnerability flickering in his eyes. "Is that stupid?"

"No," I said firmly. "It's not stupid at all."

"What if I regret it?"

"Then hair grows back. Or you get more extensions. It's not permanent." I reached over and touched his hair—the real part, near his scalp, where I could feel the warmth of his head. "You don't have to be a character, Lego. You can just be you."

His eyes welled up, but he blinked the tears back, not letting them fall. "Thanks, P'Will."

"For what?"

"For not telling me what to do. For asking what I want instead of assuming you know."

"That's... that's what I should have been doing all along."

"Yeah, well." He sniffled slightly, then smiled. "Better late than never."

"We should wrap the rest of the paintings," I said, suddenly motivated by the energy in the room. "There's still more to do."

"How many do you need for the exhibition?"

"Twenty. I have fourteen wrapped so far."

"Six more, then." Lego uncurled himself from the couch, stretching his arms above his head. "Lead the way, artist." We moved to the studio together, Lego pausing at the door to take in the chaos within. Even cleaned up, the space was overwhelming—canvases everywhere, supplies scattered across surfaces, the particular disorder of a mind that created faster than it could organize.

"I forgot how much you make," he said, looking around with wide eyes. "There's so much."

"Not all of it is good."

"Says who?"

"Me. I'm the authority on my own work."

"Debatable."

"Fourteen paintings wrapped," I said, surveying the stacks near the door. "I need twenty for the exhibition to feel complete."

"Then we wrap six more." Lego rolled up his sleeves—literally rolled them, like he was preparing for manual labor. "Show me the process again and I'll help."

We started with the painting I called "Angel." It was one of my experimental pieces—an attempt to use oil paints in a way that mimicked watercolors, letting colors bleed into each other, creating something dreamy and undefined. The figure in the

center was barely there: a suggestion of wings, a hint of human form, all rendered in grays and blues that seemed to fade at the edges like morning mist.

"This is beautiful," Lego said softly, studying the canvas before we covered it with protective wrap. "It looks like a memory. Like something you're trying to hold onto but it keeps slipping away."

"That's... exactly what it's supposed to feel like."

Lego watched intently as I demonstrated each step—the bubble wrap layered carefully, the cardboard corners positioned precisely, the tape applied in clean strips. When we moved to the next painting, he took over, his hands moving with surprising confidence. "Like this?" he asked, fitting a corner protector into place.

"Perfect."

"I'm a quick learner."

"I know. It's annoying." He laughed, and we fell into a rhythm—him wrapping, me guiding, both of us working in companionable silence broken only by occasional comments and the soft music still playing from his phone.

"This is me." Lego said, stopping in front of the painting I'd made of him.

It was one of my most realistic pieces—Lego sitting on a swing in what might have been a garden or a park or a dream of both, the background slightly blurred like a memory softening at the edges. His face was turned slightly away from the viewer, profile visible, expression peaceful. His long hair—fell in waves down his back, catching light that came from nowhere and everywhere.

"Do I really look like that?" he asked, his voice strange.

"That's how I see you."

He was quiet for a long moment, studying the painted version of himself. "I look... happy."

"You were happy when I painted this. It was after one of your dance performances—the one at the university theater last year. You came over afterward, still in your makeup, and you were just... glowing. I couldn't stop thinking about that energy. So I painted it."

"I don't remember glowing."

"That's because you never see yourself the way other people see you." I moved to stand beside him, both of us looking at the canvas. "You think you're just surviving, getting through each day, holding everything together with willpower and stubbornness. But from the outside—from where I'm standing—you're radiant, Lego."

You always have been."

He didn't say anything. But when I glanced at him, his eyes were wet. "Sorry," he managed, wiping at his face with the back of his hand. "Sorry, I'm being stupid—"

"You're not being stupid. You're being human." I put my arm around his shoulders, pulling him close. "It's allowed." He leaned into me, and we stood there for a while, looking at the painting of the boy on the swing.

"What's this one called?" he asked eventually, his voice steadier.

"I was thinking 'Golden.'"

"Golden?"

"Because that's what you are. My golden person. The one who kept showing up when everyone else went away."

He laughed—a wet, emotional sound. "That's so cheesy, P'Will."

"I'm an artist. We're allowed to be cheesy."

"Is that in the rulebook?"

"It's on page one."

Lunch arrived—I'd ordered delivery again, this time a selection of dishes that would appeal to both of us—and we ate at the dining room table, the wrapped paintings creating a kind of barrier around us. "How many is that now?" Lego asked around a mouthful of noodles.

"Eighteen. Two more to go."

"Which ones?" I thought about the remaining pieces in the studio. There were more than two—probably seven or eight that were technically finished, another dozen that were half-done, countless sketches and studies that had never made it past the initial stages. But for the exhibition, I needed to choose. I needed to decide what story I was telling.

"The abstract one," I said. "The flowers you brought last month. The arrangement with the purple and pink—I painted it the day after you left. It's not really representational, more like... impressions. Splashes of color trying to capture a feeling rather than a literal image."

"I remember those flowers." Lego's face softened. "Lavender and dahlias. With some eucalyptus for texture."

"I still don't know what half those words mean."

"That's okay. You paint them; I name them." He grinned. "What's the second painting?"

I hesitated. This was harder to explain.

"It's... abstract. Completely abstract. No figures, no objects, just color and form. It's from—" I stopped, trying to find the right words. "It's from a bad day. One of the really bad ones, a few weeks ago. I was having a depressive episode, and I couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, couldn't think. So I painted instead. Just... threw paint at the canvas until something came out."

"What came out?"

"Darkness, mostly. Grays and blacks and deep blues, all tangled together. But there's this line of gold—thin, almost invisible—running through the middle. I didn't plan it. It just appeared. Like light finding its way through the cracks." Lego was quiet, absorbing this. "I want people to see that one," I continued. "I want them to see beyond the pretty pictures and the grief-processed-through-art narrative. I want them to see what it actually looks like inside my head on the worst days. The chaos. The darkness. The desperate hope that something will break through."

"That's brave."

"It's terrifying."

"Brave and terrifying are the same thing sometimes." He reached across the table and squeezed my hand. "I'm proud of you."

Eighteen paintings wrapped. Then nineteen. Then, finally, twenty. We stood back and surveyed our work—the stacks of carefully packaged canvases, each one containing a piece of my soul, ready to be shipped to a gallery where strangers would see them and judge them and maybe, if I was lucky, understand something of what I was trying to say.

"You did it." Lego said.

"We did it."

"I just helped with the wrapping. The hard part—the actual painting—that was all you."

"The wrapping was important too. I couldn't have done this today without you here." I meant it more than I knew how to express. "I would have stared at the paintings for hours and found reasons not to finish. You kept me moving."

He smiled, pleased. "I'm good at keeping people moving. It's another talent."

"Along with humility?"

"Obviously."

The clock on the wall read 1:34 PM. Lego noticed it at the same moment I did, and his expression shifted—the relaxed ease of the morning giving way to something more practical.

"I have to go," he said, regret coloring his voice. "Class starts at 2:30."

"Right. University."

"Yeah." He didn't move toward the door. "I don't want to leave."

"I know. But you should go. Education is important." The words sounded absurd coming out of my mouth—the reclusive artist who couldn't leave his apartment lecturing about the importance of showing up to class. "You can come back after."

"Can I?"

"Of course. Anytime. The door is always open for you." I paused, then added: "Literally. You have a key."

He laughed, and the tension broke. "Okay. I'll come back tonight, then. After practice. I'll bring dinner."

"You don't have to—"

"I want to." His voice was firm. "And you're going to let me, because that's what family does. They take care of each other." Family. The word landed in my chest and stayed there, warm and heavy.

"Okay," I said. "I'll see you tonight."

I walked him to the door. This wasn't unusual—I always walked him to the door, at least as far as the threshold. But when he stepped into the hallway and turned to say goodbye, I made a decision.

"Wait." I said.

And I followed him out.

The hallway was the same as it had been last night—polished floors, neutral walls, the distant hum of the building's ventilation system. But in daylight, it looked different. Less threatening. More like what it actually was: just a corridor. Just a path from here to there.

Lego's eyes widened as he realized what I was doing. "P'Will—"

"I'm just walking you to the elevator." My heart was pounding, but I kept my voice steady. "It's not far." It wasn't far. Maybe thirty feet from my door to the elevator



bank. A distance that most people could cover in seconds without thinking about it.

For me, it felt like crossing a canyon.

But I kept walking.

One foot in front of the other. The same thing I'd done last night with the trash. The same principle: you don't have to do everything at once. You just have to take the next step.

Lego walked beside me, close enough that our shoulders almost touched. He didn't say anything, but I could feel his attention—the way he was watching me, ready to catch me if I faltered, proud of me for trying.

We reached the elevator. I pressed the down button, and we stood there waiting, the silence comfortable.

"You don't have to come back tonight," I said suddenly. "If you're tired. If practice runs late. If you have other things—"

"I'm coming back," he interrupted. "And that's final."

"I just don't want you to feel obligated—"

"P'Will." He turned to face me fully, his expression serious. "Listen to me. Coming to see you is not an obligation. It's not a duty. It's not something I do because I have to. I come because I want to. Because being with you makes me feel less alone. Because you're my family—the family I chose, the one that actually matters. Okay?"

I didn't know what to say. My throat was tight, my eyes stinging with emotion I hadn't expected. "Okay." I managed.

The elevator dinged, and the doors slid open.

Lego stepped forward, then stopped and turned back. Before I could react, he was pressing a light kiss to my cheek—quick, casual, the kind of affection he used to give freely before I'd pushed everyone away. "I'll see you tonight," he said. "Keep being brave."

And then the doors closed, taking him away.

I stood there for a long moment, staring at the closed elevator doors.

My reflection looked back at me from the polished metal surface—distorted, stretched, but still recognizably me. A man in a gray tracksuit, clean for the first time in days, standing in a hallway that wasn't his apartment.

You can do it, I told my reflection. One step at a time.

The elevator doors were like a mirror, showing me a version of myself I was only beginning to recognize. Someone who could take out the trash. Someone who could shower and dress in clean clothes. Someone who could wrap twenty paintings for an exhibition and walk a friend to the elevator.

Someone who was trying. Not fixed. Not healed. Not magically transformed into a person who could navigate the world without fear. But trying. Every day, in small ways, trying.

I took a deep breath. Then I turned and walked back to my apartment. The hallway didn't feel quite as long on the way back.